

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE    May 29, 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, sent letters to President Obama on May 28, urging him to raise pressing concerns about religious freedom in his speech to the Muslim world and with his private meetings with Saudi Arabian King Abdullah and Egyptian President Mubarak, respectively.

“The Commission respectfully urges [President Obama] to raise publicly and repeatedly the importance of the freedom of religion or belief, as this fundamental human right is severely limited in many countries with Muslim majority populations,” said Felice D. Gaer, USCIRF chair.

The complete text of the letters follows:

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The President    The White House    Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

I write today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent U.S. government commission created by Congress to monitor religious freedom worldwide and make policy recommendations to the Executive Branch and Congress. The Commission seeks to comment on your announced plan to address the Muslim world in a speech. The Commission respectfully urges you to raise publicly and repeatedly the importance of the freedom of religion or belief, as this fundamental human right is severely limited in many countries with Muslim majority populations.

The Islamic faith is of course of central importance to citizens of such countries. The Commission encourages you to speak about the United States’ commitment to religious freedom for persons of all faiths, including Muslims, which is not well understood in the Muslim world. The United States has repeatedly advocated for the religious freedoms of Muslims, whether for the Uighur Muslims in China, Rohingya Muslims in Burma, Shi’a Muslims in Saudi Arabia, or others. Indeed, U.S. government actions demonstrate this commitment through the designations of Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia as “countries of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, in part for the severe human rights abuses directed against individual Muslims. Your highlighting of U.S. government support for religious freedoms and freedom of thought within Islam will not only show that our country is not at “war” with Islam, but in fact respects it. In fact, the U.S. government works to protect those individual Muslims who face repression for expressing dissenting views.

In your speech and other interactions, the Commission also urges you to stress the importance of protecting the religious freedoms of minority religious communities, as well as the freedom of thought and conscience, so that every individual is free to dissent and explore freely views that may differ from orthodox interpretations. Religious tolerance is a key component in building democratic societies that respect international standards, and is based on our commitment to commonly shared international norms, such as to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Constitutional laws are not the problem generally, as the Commission found through its 2005 study of Constitutional provisions on freedom of religion or belief in Muslim majority countries that compare favorably with international legal standards. Instead, religious tolerance and religious freedom should be government policy which would go a long way in fostering a culture of tolerance and religious pluralism. For example, Qatar, a small country in the Gulf region, has made noteworthy strides in this regard. Despite sharing a conservative Sunni Muslim religious

ideology with Saudi Arabia, Qatar has taken the first steps in recognizing greater religious freedoms by permitting non-Muslim places of worship, unlike Saudi Arabia that strictly prohibits the public practice of any faith other than the government's interpretation of Islam. While Qatar must do more to fully meet international standards on religious freedom, it now recognizes various Christian denominations, and last year the first Roman Catholic church was opened and the construction of six other churches are in progress.

While constitutions may not be problematic per se, laws do need to be changed in several countries, such as provisions dealing with apostasy and blasphemy. Removing these provisions would do much to advance religious freedom, as it would prevent the prosecution of individuals for internationally protected religious activity and help lead societies to value and respect religious diversity. Notably, more than half of the world's Muslim population lives in countries that are neither Islamic republics nor countries that have declared Islam to be the state religion. Thus, the majority of Muslims worldwide reside in countries that either proclaim the state to be secular, or that make no pronouncements concerning Islam as an official state religion. Your voice raising the importance of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion would energize these discussions across the region.

As you know from Indonesia, adherents to the Islamic faith can be found around the world, not just in the Middle East, as they live and worship in Europe, Africa, Central and South Asia, and in our own country. The Commission is a reflection of the United States' commitment to freedom of religion or belief. The International Religious Freedom Act made promotion and protection of the freedom of religion or belief a more visible component of U.S. foreign policy. Raising the importance of this human right, and in particular U.S. activities for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, should find a receptive audience and will go far in informing them about the United States' historic commitment to religious freedom for all. Sincerely, Felice D. Gaer  
Chair

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May 28, 2009      The President      The White House      Washington, DC      Dear  
Mr. President:

Regarding your bilateral visits to Saudi Arabia and Egypt next week, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges you to raise concerns about religious freedom and related human rights during your meetings with King Abdullah and President Mubarak, respectively.

**Saudi Arabia**      The Commission has reported on the status of freedom of religion and belief in Saudi Arabia for years, repeatedly finding that the Saudi government continues to be one of the world's worst abusers of religious freedom. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia has been designated by the U.S. State Department since 2004 as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. However, since 2005 the U.S. government has kept in place a waiver of any action to "further the purposes" of IRFA. The Commission believes it is time to lift the waiver as a consequence of CPC designation, and take action as mandated

under IRFA due to the continuance of systematic abuses.

Despite King Abdullah undertaking some limited reform measures and promoting inter-religious dialogue in international fora over the past year, the Saudi government persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and even interferes with private religious practice. This violates the rights of the large communities of Muslims from other schools of Sunni Islam, as well as members of the Shi'a community, including Ismailis, who comprise 10-15 percent of the population in Saudi Arabia, and the 2 to 3 million Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and other expatriate workers residing in the Kingdom. In fact, churches, temples, and all other non-Muslim places of worship are prohibited in Saudi Arabia, the only country in the Muslim world where this is the case. Restrictions on public religious practice are officially enforced in large part by members of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, or religious police, who regularly overstep their authority with impunity and are not subject to judicial review.

Mr. President, in July 2006, the State Department announced that ongoing bilateral discussions with Saudi Arabia had enabled the U.S. government to identify and confirm a number of policies that the Saudi government "is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purpose of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups." Our Commission visited Saudi Arabia in 2007 to explore the results of these Saudi government pledges to institute reforms. We concluded that many of the pledges remain just that: promises that have not yet been reflected in the promulgation and implementation of tangible protections for human rights. Unfortunately, this remains the case in 2009.

For example, despite commitments to improve the Saudi government-controlled school curriculum by 2008, the Commission has found that textbooks used in Saudi Arabia continue to contain inflammatory language. In its annual report released earlier this month, the Commission recommended that the U.S. government should undertake and make public an assessment of the Ministry of Education textbooks used during the 2008-2009 school year in Saudi Arabia to determine if they have been revised to remove passages that teach religious intolerance or hatred. The Commission is also concerned that the Saudi government has made insufficient efforts to stop the spread of extremist ideology from the Kingdom around the world. We urge you to request that the King spearhead Saudi government efforts to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology, both within Saudi Arabia and around the world. In addition, over the past few years, abuses by the religious police have become the subject of unprecedented attention by the public and in international media. Numerous cases have gone to trial, including alleged beatings and deaths of Saudi citizens, yet in the recent cases that have been prosecuted, members of the religious police have not been held accountable. We urge you to press King Abdullah to ensure that members of the religious police are held accountable for such abuses.

I would also like to draw your attention to one specific case. Hadi Al-Mutaif, an Ismaili Muslim in Najran, is serving a life sentence after initially being condemned to death for apostasy in 1994 for a remark he made as a teenager that was deemed blasphemous. The Commission repeatedly has raised this case and was told by Saudi government authorities that there would

be a resolution. More than two years after such assurances, Mr. Al-Mutaif remains in prison, much of the time in solitary confinement, where he reportedly has attempted to commit suicide because of the dire situation. We respectfully recommend that you urge King Abdullah to release Hadi Al-Mutaif on humanitarian grounds, as well as all other remaining religious prisoners in Saudi Arabia, including 17 other Ismailis in Najran who have languished in prison for terms ranging from more than seven to 14 years.

**Egypt** Concerning Egypt, the Commission has closely monitored developments there throughout its ten-year history and has repeatedly expressed concern about the serious limitations on the freedom of religion or belief perpetrated through law and policy, or permitted by the government. These limitations on religious freedom have encouraged extremist elements in Egyptian society and undermined the growth of civil society.

The Commission has found that serious religious freedom violations continue to affect Coptic Orthodox and other Christians, Jews, and Baha'is, as well as members of minority Muslim communities and Muslim dissidents. Reports of religiously-motivated attacks, discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against these communities remain widespread. There is continued prosecution in state security courts and imprisonment for non-conforming Muslims and dissidents are accused of blasphemy and criticizing the Egyptian government. In addition, there has been an upsurge of attacks by Islamists targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians. The Egyptian government has not taken sufficient steps to improve the treatment of members of its religious minority communities, or, in many cases, to punish those responsible for violence or other severe violations of religious freedom. Furthermore, for all Christian groups, government permission is required to build a new church or repair an existing one, and the approval process for church construction is time-consuming and inflexible. The Egyptian government should implement procedures that would ensure that all places of worship are subject to the same transparent, non-discriminatory, and efficient regulations regarding construction and maintenance.

In addition, the government has not eliminated bureaucratic hurdles preventing Egyptians from updating identity documents to reflect a change in religion from Islam to Christianity or to permit members of the Baha'i faith to identify their religion on official documents. The government also has not responded adequately to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media.

Internationally, the Commission is deeply concerned about Egypt's leadership at the United Nations in promoting the flawed "defamation of religions" concept, which seeks to limit the freedoms of religion and expression. Considering that the United States has just joined the UN Human Rights Council, it would be appropriate for your administration to remind Egypt that it can address the underlying concerns through other less divisive approaches and not through the distortion of UN human rights bodies with claims of "defamation" or incitement against "religions," which has been addressed exclusively to protect criticism of Islam. The flawed "defamation" concept is an attempt to export blasphemy laws to the international level and we urge you to communicate U.S. concerns about this initiative.

Due to these persistent, serious infringements on religious freedom, earlier this month the Commission again placed Egypt on its Watch List of countries requiring close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the government. Because of Egypt's very limited progress in the aforementioned areas concerning freedom of religion or belief, the Commission continues to recommend that the U.S. government should establish a timetable for implementation of political and human rights reforms tied to the allocation of

assistance to the Egyptian government.

Mr. President, encouraging Saudi Arabia and Egypt to respect religious freedom and related human rights will do much to undercut the growth in extremism and bolster moderate forces as we engage these countries on a variety of urgent issues. You raising the specific concerns highlighted above could have a concrete and lasting impact for the religious freedoms of the citizens of both nations and other countries in the region. Sincerely, Felice D. Gaer

Chair

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To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director, at [tcarter@uscirf.gov](mailto:tcarter@uscirf.gov) or (202) 523-3257 begin\_of\_the\_skype\_highlighting (202) 523-3257

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USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.